

**HOW THE ARTS SECTOR CAN USE EDUCATION TO BETTER SERVE  
PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES**

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# THESIS

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## ABSTRACT

People with disabilities have been a historically underserved audience in the arts and culture community. This thesis will examine how education can help people with disabilities experience the arts. This is done through general research on people with disabilities and a case study of an arts education program called the *Sounds of Learning Program* created by the Opera Company of Philadelphia. It also investigates accessibility of the arts particularly in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

The research shows that to increase access to the arts for persons with disabilities, educational programming needs to be available for this population to learn about the arts. In addition, programs need to be offered to administrators in the field to learn how to best serve people with disabilities. The thesis concludes by using information from the interviews, in addition to suggestions from experienced teachers, to offer ideas on the best ways to reach, educate and serve people with disabilities in the arts and culture sector.

Dedicated to my mother who edited all of my papers since middle school and my father who stood by me as I worked through this program.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Abstract</i>	.....	<i>ii</i>
<i>Dedication</i>	.....	<i>iii</i>
<i>Table of Contents</i>	.....	<i>iv</i>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	.....	<b>1</b>
<b>CHAPTER ONE</b>	.....	<b>1</b>
Literature and Research Review	.....	1
Gaining Rights	.....	1
Effects of the Arts	.....	3
Making the Arts Accessible	.....	4
Accessibility in the Arts -		
A look at Paper Mill Playhouse.....		5
Serving the Public	.....	9
Charity v. Medical Model	.....	11
Methodology	.....	12
<b>CHAPTER TWO</b>	.....	<b>14</b>
History of Interviewee		
Organizations	.....	14
Interviews	.....	16
<b>CHAPTER THREE</b>	.....	<b>27</b>
Interview Analysis	.....	27
Curriculum Analysis		
and Suggestions	.....	28
Final Suggestions	.....	32
<b>APPENDICES</b>	.....	<b>34</b>
<b>SOURCES CITED</b>	.....	<b>38</b>

## INTRODUCTION

In the current social climate it has become inherently clear that the arts and culture sector needs to become accessible to as many different people as possible. Organizations need to explore new and creative ways to connect the experiences they offer with patrons of all different ages, cultures, income, and physical and cognitive abilities. Arts organizations should not ask if different populations want to experience the arts, but rather “how the arts can be more influential in the learning process.”<sup>1</sup> This will help organizations with internal growth and assist in furthering their missions.

Many people with disabilities have not had the opportunity to visit a cultural venue either because they are intimidated by the arts or because the experience has not been accessible to them. Therefore, an additional benefit to reaching this untapped audience will be the positive outcomes of connecting this group of patrons to their first arts and cultural experience. People with disabilities are a potential audience that has been historically underserved and who would benefit greatly from the arts.

### *Literature and Research Review*

#### Gaining Rights

For many years, people with disabilities have had to fight to be viewed and treated equally. Though one in five Americans live with a disability,<sup>2</sup> it was not until 1973 when Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act was passed that

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<sup>1</sup> VSA Arts, “Taking Notice Through the Lens: Using photography as a tool for learning and expression,” <http://www.vsarts.org/documents/resources/TakingNotice.pdf> (accessed October 22, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Philip Rosenbaum, “Disabilities debate rages 20 years later,” *CNN Living*, July, 26, 2010, <http://www.cnn.com/2010/LIVING/07/26/ada.history/index.html> (accessed October 19, 2010).

discrimination against people with disabilities began to be addressed.<sup>3</sup> “Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 prohibits discrimination on the basis of a disability towards otherwise qualified people with disabilities by recipients of federal financial assistance.”<sup>4</sup>

The next large step in equality for people with disabilities was not seen again until the American Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed in 1990. At this time President George H. W. Bush noted that “people with disabilities were the poorest, least educated and largest minority in America.”<sup>5</sup> He received moving testimonials from individuals who “had to crawl on their hands and knees to go up a flight of stairs; who could not ride on a bus because there wasn't a lift; who could not even cross the street in their wheelchairs because there were no curb cuts.”<sup>6</sup> The American Disability Act states “that people with disabilities should be viewed with having the right to govern their own lives, and have equal opportunity encouraging the growth and integration of people with disabilities into society.”<sup>7</sup> In addition, it “prohibits discrimination and mandates that Americans be accorded equality in pursuing jobs, goods, services and other opportunities.”<sup>8</sup> The American Disability Act of the 1990's defines the term ‘disability’, with respect to an individual as “a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of such individual; a record of such impairment; or being regarded as having such an impairment.”<sup>9</sup>

The negative images and stereotypes that led people with disabilities to be discriminated against in the past are the same that have caused them to have limited access to the arts. Though the arts gives people with disabilities a new “world of resources and opportunities, provides them with an outlet for creative

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<sup>3</sup> “History of the ADA,” *Mountain States Center for Independent Living*, <http://www.mtstcil.org/skills/ada1-b.html> (accessed November 1, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Rosenbaum, “Disabilities debate rages 20 years later.”

<sup>6</sup> Rosenbaum, “Disabilities debate rages 20 years later.”

<sup>7</sup> “ADA Handbook Preamble,” *Job Accommodation Network*, <http://askjan.org/media/ADAHandbook/preamble.txt> (accessed October 23, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> “The Americans with Disabilities Act,” *The Center for Accessible Society*, <http://www.accessiblesociety.org/topics/ada/index.html> (accessed October 23, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> “What is the legal definition of a disability,” *United Cerebral Palsy*, [http://www.ucp.org/ucp\\_channel/doc.cfm/1/13/12632/12632-12632/6184](http://www.ucp.org/ucp_channel/doc.cfm/1/13/12632/12632-12632/6184) (accessed November 24, 2010).



expression and unlimited possibilities for success,”<sup>10</sup> many arts organizations do not understand or accommodate this population.

### Effects of the Arts

In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of research performed on how the arts enhance people’s lives. As author Marcel Proust wrote: "only through art can we emerge from ourselves and know what another person sees." We see art as the universal language that has the ability to unite all people.”<sup>11</sup> He continues by stating:

“For a person who cannot speak, a dance performance may clearly communicate even the most complicated message. For a person with a mental disability who cannot communicate effectively through words, a painting rich with color and life may say more than verbal sentences ever could. And, for a person who has limited mobility, a song sung with emotion and spirit may elicit movement toward a state of clarity and joy.”<sup>12</sup>

The research performed on the effects art has on people living with disabilities spans all races, genders, ages and demographics. For example, *The Gerontologist*, “a bimonthly journal that provides a multidisciplinary perspective on human aging through the publication of research and analysis in gerontology,”<sup>13</sup> did a study in 2006 to show how exposure to the arts has proven health benefits.<sup>14</sup> More specifically, *The Gerontologist* study was on “professionally conducted community-based cultural programs and their effect on the physical, mental and emotional health of the elderly. The researchers found

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<sup>10</sup> “The Value of the Arts to People with Disabilities,” VSA *The International Organization on Arts and Disability*, <http://www.vsarts.org/x696.xml> (accessed November 15, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *The Gerontologist Website*. <http://gerontologist.oxfordjournals.org> (accessed November 30, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> Gene D. Cohen, Susan Perlstein, Jeff Chapline, Jeanne Kelly, Kimberly M. Firth and Samuel Simmens, “The Impact of Professionally Conducted Cultural Programs on the Physical Health, Mental Health, and Social Functioning of Older Adults,” *The Gerontologist* 46, no. 6 (2006).

that the groups participating in the arts activity reported fewer doctor visits, falls, health problems; and higher morale and more activity than the control group.”<sup>15</sup>

An additional study investigating how Alzheimer’s disease affects the brain, “used two of the Relax with Classics recordings, "largo" and "adagio," and found that music profoundly decreased patient symptoms. Physically agitated behaviors decreased by 56%, and verbally agitated behaviors by 57%.”<sup>16</sup>

### Making the Arts Accessible

Even with the increasing amount of research that provides evidence that the arts are able to improve health, learning and memory, we still see a void in accessibility in the arts. While it is sometimes hard to take a step back and ask ourselves what the arts mean to us as individuals and what our lives would be like having not had the opportunity to experience it, every person should have the chance to ask the question.

Additional questions that an arts organization needs to ask in an effort to effectively serve people with disabilities include: how can the arts facility become a physically accessible space; what can be added to the programming to make it more accessible; and, how can the organization best serve and connect with people with disabilities? Though some methods to serve people with disabilities may seem clear, such as building a ramp for people who use wheelchairs or providing Braille programs for people who are blind or visually impaired, a majority of the etiquette that is appropriate while interacting with people who have a disability may not be as obvious.

Due to the lack in adequate service training, “individuals with disabilities continually encounter various forms of discrimination, including outright intentional exclusion, the discriminatory effects of architectural, transportation, and communication barriers, overprotective rules and policies, failure to make modifications to existing facilities and practices, exclusionary qualification

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Lily Casura, “Sound Health: Music as medicine for the New Millennium,” Townsend Letter for Doctors and Patients, no 2, [www.townsendletter.com](http://www.townsendletter.com) (accessed December 12, 2010).

standards and criteria, segregation and relegation to lesser services, programs, activities, benefits, jobs or other opportunities.”<sup>17</sup> Therefore, an individual’s lack of experience or education in corresponding with people who have a disability may cause them to be disrespectful without knowing.

Examples of service training include:

- “Knowing the importance of using “People First” language. Using “People First” language means addressing the person you are speaking with first instead of the disability so that the disability is not what defines the person.
- Speaking directly to whomever you are trying to converse with even if they are accompanied by a companion or aid.
- Not assuming that a person with a disability needs help, but instead asking first and listening to what is requested.”<sup>18</sup>

Generally, an arts organization is able to make its services accessible by being sensitive and responsive to the needs of people with disabilities through:

“the design and implementation of a program; the guidelines and policies in place to support the development and implementation of its programs; the printed materials created to promote the program; the means through which the program is communicated to the public; and the physical design of the facility used to implement the program.”<sup>19</sup>

### Accessibility in the Arts – A look at Paper Mill Playhouse

Two cultural organizations that create specialized programming to meet the needs of specific audiences are Paper Mill Playhouse and Pushcart Players. “Paper Mill Playhouse has been a national leader in accessibility for over 25 years, and is committed to making the live arts theatre experience available to everyone so that they may attend with dignity and independence.”<sup>20</sup> Pushcart Players is a theatre in its 38<sup>th</sup> year that has embedded an Arts Access Plan into its mission with the goal to “reach schools and students with developmental, learning or other disabilities, by adapting or modifying its programs to suit the needs of a

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<sup>17</sup> Mountain States Center for Independent Living, “The History of the ADA.”

<sup>18</sup> VSA Arts, “Taking Notice.”

<sup>19</sup> “Art Access Made Easy,” VSA Arts, <http://www.vsarts.org/x518.xml> (accessed November 30, 2010).

<sup>20</sup> Paper Mill Playhouse. <http://papermill.org> (accessed March 11, 2012).

particular community.”<sup>21</sup> These two organizations partner together to offer performances during each season that are sensory friendly. This means they are adjusted to meet the needs of children on the Autism spectrum, people with other developmental disabilities and their families.

“Autism is a developmental disability that usually appears during the first three years of a child’s life. It is a result of a neurological disorder that affects the functioning of the brain. Children and adults with Autism exhibit atypical, repetitive behaviors and deficits in social and communication skills.”<sup>22</sup>

As a result, often it is hard for people with Autism to experience the arts due to the different ways they relate to public situations. Paper Mill’s programming and partnership exemplifies how a theatre examined the needs of a community and worked with them to, in the end, serve a new demographic that previously did not have access to the arts. To learn about the start of this type of program, Lisa Cooney, the Director of Education at Paper Mill Playhouse, was interviewed.

Lisa started the interview by explaining that in 2010, the Paper Mill Playhouse was approached by families in the New Jersey community to present a performance that was appropriate for people with Autism. After many staff meetings, Paper Mill Playhouse decided that shows from the children’s theatre series, rather than the main-stage series, would work best as Autism-friendly performances. The decision to present shows from the children’s series was based on many different factors including the time it would take to adjust the scripts, the length of performances and other costs.<sup>23</sup>

All of Paper Mill’s children’s theatre shows are produced by outside theatre companies. Therefore, the next step Lisa took was to find a theatre that would partner with them and be willing to tweak its shows to make them Autism-friendly. Lisa thought of Pushcart Players because they have a good reputation,

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<sup>21</sup> *Pushcart Players* <http://pushcartplayers.org> (accessed March 11, 2012).

<sup>22</sup> *Autism New Jersey*. [autismnj.org](http://autismnj.org) (accessed March 11, 2012).

<sup>23</sup> Lisa Cooney. Paper Mill Playhouse. Interviewed by author, 8 September 2011.

have experience making accessible performances, are a smaller company and are located in the same community.<sup>24</sup>

Once Lisa found the partnering theatre company, she began to research best practices in serving people with Autism. She found that AMC Cinemas were offering “Sensory Sensitive” performances for people with Autism, which gave Lisa a blueprint for how to adapt Paper Mill’s performances to best serve this community. From the AMC program, she learned to have the lights up and sound lowered during the performance, to allow people to walk around during the performance and to permit the audience to make noises. Though this information was helpful, it was hard for Lisa and her co-workers to see how the “Sensory Sensitive” movies truly translated into live theatre. Therefore, they set up meetings with experts in the Autism field.<sup>25</sup>

In November of 2012, Lisa, the Manager of Access Programs at Paper Mill Playhouse; Linda Meyer, the Executive Director of Autism New Jersey; Maria Arnold, the Director of Education at Rutgers University; and parents from the community sat down to discuss this new project. Lisa explained that the most informative part of this meeting was hearing from the parents. They expressed the difficulty of finding places they could take their kids with Autism. They did not want to hide their children, but the truth is that they shied away from taking their kids to cultural events, especially live theatre, out of respect for other paying audience members. Through the meeting Paper Mill Playhouse also learned about structural changes that could be made in its programming including: the need for intermissions; creating resource materials to prepare the family for their outings; creating videos that families can sing along to before the show; and providing a link with a study guide for each show. In addition, the staff learned that they needed to make the shows more literal by taking out jesters, sarcasm and innuendoes.<sup>26</sup>

Lastly, the parents asked if Paper Mill Playhouse would open its doors before the performance to allow families to experience the space prior to the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

performance. To meet this request, the theatre opens its doors the day before sensory-friendly performances and sets up the space as it will appear during the actual performances. This means Paper Mill has the set up, lights on, doors open, box office open, and staff and ushers on duty.

After much planning and research, the theatre had its first successful sensory-friendly show in the summer of 2011. At this performance of Pushcart's *Stone Soup and Other Stories*, the theatre environment was altered, providing a sensory-friendly, comfortable and judgment-free space that was welcoming for all families. Theatre lights remained up, sound levels were lowered and children were free to talk and leave their seats under parental supervision. Pre-show resource materials were available on the Paper Mill website, including a sequence book, study guide and sing-along prep video. The show's script was adapted by Pushcart to ensure it was literal and free of dramatic devices such as innuendo and sarcasm, which are not readily understood by some children with Autism. Steps were also taken to equalize the dynamics of the music and performances to avoid sudden or jarring changes in sound levels.<sup>27</sup>

The goal now is to build a larger audience and serve more people. Lisa explained that one in ninety people in New Jersey has autism, while nationally the rate is one in every one hundred people. Furthermore, on average there are thirteen families in a square mile that deal with autism on some level. Because there are a lot of people who can benefit from these shows, the theatre wants to work on promoting them and making the availability of its services known.<sup>28</sup>

The example above shows that an arts organization can be accessible to people with a variety of disabilities by modifying or altering its product or physical space. Additional accommodations include offering performances with Sign Language Interpretation, Assisted Listening Devices for people who are deaf or hearing impaired or Audio Description, Sensory Tours, Braille and large print programs for people who are blind or low vision. Audio Description takes place during the performance and allows the audience to know everything that is

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

happening on stage, including silent movements or facial expressions. While an arts organization can be fully accessible to people with a cognitive or physical disability, the other side of the equation is that the target population needs to be willing to be served.

### Serving the Public

Like a majority of the general public, many individuals who have a disability and have never experienced art are unsure about the arts. This may cause them to miss experiences that they will enjoy and learn from. As the Philadelphia Cultural Alliance found, “consumers perceive a range of barriers to arts and culture participation, including:

- Uncertainty about how to behave in arts and cultural settings.
- Not having friends to go with and not wanting to go alone to an arts event.
- Not enjoying the 'sit still and be quiet' element of traditional arts presentations.
- Feeling that other people like them are not going to be there.”<sup>29</sup>

As a result, it is not enough to tell a person with a disability that he or she should not be uneasy about going to a theatre or museum. Instead, the arts sector must prove that its experiences are worthwhile and accessible.

To make the arts more accessible, some arts organizations have found that having an educational component accompany an arts experience proves effective in meeting the needs of people with disabilities. For example, the VSA of Rhode Island, whose mission is to open doors for children and adults with disabilities, created a program called “Taking Notice.” The program “provided an inclusive arts experience for 34 students, with and without disabilities, who were in the third and fourth grade at Potter-Burns Elementary School in Pawtucket, Rhode Island.”<sup>30</sup> The program gave the students the opportunity to work with a resident photographer for 28 weeks. Potter-Burn Elementary is located in the city and has

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<sup>29</sup> “Research Into Action: Pathways to New Opportunities,” *Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance*, <http://www.philaculture.org/research/reports/research-into-action> (accessed November 3, 2010).

<sup>30</sup> VSA Arts, “Taking Notice.”

a student body that includes at risk youth and children with disabilities.<sup>31</sup> When reflecting on the experience, the teachers found that:

“The collaborative approach had the greatest impact on the students with disabilities. For the students with learning disabilities, the program provided a means of addressing their visual perception problems. Using the camera together with their focusing skills allowed them to understand things that they might not have readily understood with their eyes alone. For students with developmental disabilities, the pictures they held in their hands assisted in their retention and recalling of information. For students with speech and language expression difficulties, the ability to use photography assisted them in conveying the messages of what they learned. Teachers also reported improved competency skills, including a more thorough understanding and better retention of core curriculum subject matter, which resulted in better grades.”<sup>32</sup>

Long-term art classes that turn the participants into artists is one example of an educational component that the arts field can offer. Giving individuals an elongated experience with arts enables them to learn about the actual art process, artists in the field, and, most importantly, themselves. The same mentality is applied to education sessions that may only last an afternoon.

For example, attending an opera, for many, is extremely intimidating. When we think of opera we think of ball gowns and extremely educated, wealthy consumers. Imagine how a person who lives with a disability and who has never attended an opera might feel about attending a performance. Perhaps they think that there is no way they will understand it, or that they do not belong because they do not have the correct clothes to wear. These are all ideas that the Opera Company of Philadelphia hopes to address and dismiss through its *Sounds of Learning Program*.

This class is offered to school children as well as people with disabilities. For Philadelphia school children, this program is incorporated into their curriculum months before the opera performance. Through a partnership with Art-Reach, a local nonprofit that connects the arts with underserved audiences,

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.



the program is also offered to people with disabilities. The curriculum is taught during a two-hour session prior to seeing the opera. The *Sounds of Learning* curriculum is written by staff members at the Opera Company and includes information on the history of the Opera Company of Philadelphia, the venue where the performance takes place, opera etiquette and a history of opera. It also includes opera terminology and excerpts from the script. By reviewing the topics covered in this curriculum, it is clear that the point is to not only educate the participants about the opera but to also make them feel more comfortable about attending a performance. This is proven effective by presenting information in a way that lets the audience know that the opera can be understood, appreciated and enjoyed by anyone.

By introducing an educational component to an arts experience the hope is that the participants will take what they learned and apply it to other areas of their lives. Some human service agencies that serve people with disabilities use exposure to art as a time that the people they serve can escape from reality or apply an arts experience to a therapy plan. For some individuals who have not always had a disability, it is hard to cope with the change in lifestyle. Therefore, human service organizations who serve this population use arts experiences to teach their clients that they can still be independent and do things they love, such as go to a theatre performance.

### Charity vs. Medical Model

When educating and speaking with people with disabilities, teachers and arts administrators need to be aware of the best ways to present information. For many years people with disabilities were being taught under either the Charity or Medical Model. “In the “Charity Model,” people with disabilities are portrayed as “broken” or as sick. The assumption is that all people with disabilities want to be fixed and cured. The Charity Model leads people to believe that those with disabilities are not contributing members of society. This perception can cause

discrimination and arouse prejudice.”<sup>33</sup> “In the “Medical Model” the teacher’s focus is on the person’s disability, rather than on the needs of the person.”<sup>34</sup> In both of these examples, the disability is put before the person or the disability defines the person. In recent years, teachers have been encouraged to educate under the “Social or Rights Based Model.”

“Central to the Social or Rights Model is the belief that individuals with disabilities have a right to access, belong to, contribute to, and to be valued in their local community. This model focuses on the strengths, abilities, and experiences of people with disabilities. Supporting individuals with disabilities in this model does not mean helping them to become “normal,” but instead focuses on tackling the social or physical barriers the individual faces in daily living.”<sup>35</sup>

### Methodology

It is imperative that the arts sector is always a part of the conversation that explores new and creative ways to best connect with and serve people with disabilities. In order to be a part of this conversation, this thesis gathers information directly from the arts sector and those who use its services. First, the Manager of Access Programming from Paper Mill Playhouse was interviewed. This arts organization has successfully examined the needs of its community and has adjusted its programming to be accessible to a diverse group of people including those with physical, learning and cognitive disabilities. In addition to other resources, the thesis used what was learned from Paper Mill Playhouse to compare it to other organizations in Philadelphia. The research continues with a case study of the *Sounds of Learning Program* created by the Opera Company of Philadelphia. In order to gather the most insightful data, a set of interview questions for a staff member of the Opera Company of Philadelphia, a consumer

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<sup>33</sup> “Center for Human Policy,” *Disability Studies for Teachers*, <http://www.disabilitystudiesforteachers.org> (accessed November 26, 2010).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

organization, and Art-Reach, a leader in the arts and accessibility field, was generated. The answers from these personal interviews were used to analyze the effectiveness of the *Sounds of Learning Program* in teaching people with disabilities, in addition to studying the effectiveness of the Philadelphia arts and culture community in serving people with disabilities.

Next, a website called Key Arts was reviewed. This site was originally created by Bill Pearce, a teacher in the Purchase Line School District in Central Pennsylvania, who “created the resource materials on music and organized and helped others do the same for visual arts, theatre and dance on the Pennsylvania Department of Education website for arts teachers who desire to make their classrooms more inclusive of children with disabilities.”<sup>36</sup> In other words, this website covers information about art integration and ways to adapt general curriculum and art curriculum to address the needs of people with different disabilities. The website gives suggestions on how to change curriculum for dance, music, visual arts and theatre in relation to the following disabilities: Autism, Deaf-Blindness, Emotional Disturbance, Hearing Impairment, Intellectual Disability, Orthopedic Impairment, Learning Disabilities, Speech or Language Impairment, Visual Impairment and Traumatic Brain Injury. This thesis concentrates on how to adjust a curriculum to best serve a class in which people have different disabilities. More specifically, it examines what suggestions teachers gave for teaching each art form to people with the disabilities listed above in addition to what suggestions overlapped when teaching different art forms to people with different disabilities. Lastly, the conducted research took note of what accommodations are specific to Autism, Hearing Impairment, Visual Impairment and Intellectual Disabilities.

After the research was collected, the paper concludes with recommendations on ways to connect people with disabilities to the arts through the use of educational tools. Though every arts organization is different, this paper includes information that can be used generally and can be taken and catered to each unique organization.

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<sup>36</sup> “Wrap Your Mind Around This Workshop,” *Art-Reach Workshop*, August 10, 2011.

The information collected and discussed in this thesis only begins to touch upon the importance of education in the arts when serving people with disabilities. More research needs to be done throughout the arts and culture community both nationwide and worldwide. This thesis concentrates on the arts and culture sector in Philadelphia and has only conducted interviews with arts administrators working at presenting theatres. By interviewing employees from all artistic fields, in addition to educators and consumers, the arts community can help uncover creative ways to educate and connect with this population. First person interviews, versus anonymous surveys, will allow people in the field to gather the most meaningful data. This is due to the time spent with the interviewee that helps to develop a relationship and enable the interviewer to truly understand their points of view through meaningful conversation.

## HISTORY OF INTERVIEWEE ORGANIZATIONS

### *Opera Company of Philadelphia*

The Opera Company of Philadelphia was formed in 1975 and is “committed to delivering outstanding productions of traditional and new repertoire.”<sup>37</sup> They are able to do this by creating new productions in their in-house production center in addition to staying in tune with the international opera scene.

Furthermore, the Opera Company is also “committed to ensuring opera’s future through both artistic innovation and audience development by creating educational programs geared to introducing the rich heritage of opera to the curriculum of public and private schools, as well as sponsoring programs that appeal to both longtime and new opera audiences.”<sup>38</sup> One program created in an effort to reach Philadelphia students is the *Sounds of Learning Program*. The literary-based program has “brought opera to more than 120,000 area students for

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<sup>37</sup> *Opera Company of Philadelphia*. <http://www.operaphila.org> (accessed April 21, 2011).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

over 17 seasons.”<sup>39</sup> It is designed for students from 5<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade and strives for arts-integrated literacy development. This program incorporates more than just making a show accessible to a student-aged audience; it makes the experience as meaningful as possible by integrating lessons about the opera into the school’s curriculum. Teachers participate in a staff development program that lasts 4 to 6 weeks and receive lesson plans and activity books from the Opera Company of Philadelphia.

### *Art-Reach*

Formed in 1986, Art-Reach has made it their mission to “enrich lives by connecting underserved audiences with cultural experiences so that they may enjoy and benefit from the transformative powers of the arts.”<sup>40</sup> Art-Reach connects the arts with traditionally underserved audiences including people with disabilities, at-risk youth, the economically disadvantaged and the elderly in need. It partners with “125 arts and cultural organizations and 175 human service agencies throughout the Delaware Valley. Each year Art-Reach provides arts and cultural opportunities to over 15,000 individuals who would not normally have access to the arts.”<sup>41</sup> In addition to being the only organization of its kind in the tri-state area, Art-Reach also “serves as a public resource and advocate for cultural accessibility while also helping cultural organizations with their outreach efforts, fill empty seats and diversify audiences.”<sup>42</sup>

Art-Reach achieves its mission by offering different programs made possible through partnerships with arts and culture organizations. Programming includes the Ticketing Program, In-Facility Program, Workshop Program and Independence Starts Here. The Ticketing Program distributes deeply discounted tickets to performing arts events, museums, gardens and historic sites across the Philadelphia region. The In-Facility Program brings artists to member agencies

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> *Art-Reach Website*. <http://www.art-reach.org> (accessed April 21, 2011).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

for those who are unable to leave a member's facility due to physical or economical barriers. The Workshop Program offers an Art-Reach member a longer and more in depth experience with an artist and actually turns members into artists themselves. Lastly, Independence Starts Here, a joint initiative with VSA Pennsylvania, presents a list of cultural events that are accessible to people with visual or hearing impairments on Phillyfunguide.

### *Associated Services for the Blind*

Associated Services for the Blind (ASB) "is a private non-profit organization created to promote self-esteem, independence and self-determination in people who are blind or visually impaired. They provide support through education, training and resources, as well as through community action and public education, serving as a voice and advocate for the rights of all people who are blind or visually impaired."<sup>43</sup> "Every aspect of an individual's life is affected with the onset of blindness or visual impairment and ASB is an organization that was formed to help clients overcome their fears and realize their strengths. ASB offers a range of services challenging clients to adaptively rehabilitate, re-educate and re-create themselves so that they can lead fulfilling, productive lives."<sup>44</sup>

### Interviews

The individuals who were interviewed come from three different organizations in the Philadelphia area that all have diverse relationships with the arts and culture community. The goal was to learn different people's perspectives on how the Philadelphia arts and culture sector can improve its services for people with disabilities. Therefore, someone from a presenting arts organization, a consumer organization, and an individual who works to connect the two were interviewed to see how their views on this issue differ and where they overlap.

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<sup>43</sup> *Associated Services for the Blind*. <http://asb.org> (accessed May 1, 2011).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*.

*Michael Bolton - Opera Company of Philadelphia*

The first person to be interviewed was Michael Bolton, who started at the Opera Company of Philadelphia (OCP) in 2001. Over the years, he has filled a variety of roles at the Opera Company, and since 2006 he has been the Director of Community Programs.

The interview with Michael Bolton concentrated on the Opera Company's *Sounds of Learning Program*. Michael explains:

“A former employee who was working on his doctoral dissertation on reading and literacy while working at OCP created this program. The creator's passion came from his battle with Dyslexia and his interest in using alternative methods to help people learn how to read. As a result, he would sneak into the Academy of Music to see the operas and would draft and conduct brief lessons to teach adolescents about what they were viewing.”<sup>45</sup>

“The program started to grow when the creator began reaching out to local schools. To this day, the program continues to succeed due to the passion of key Opera Company staff who believe in the power of the arts.”<sup>46</sup> Michael believes that the arts are able to inspire curiosity and new passions. “It gives people new ways to learn not only about the art form they are experiencing, but also about themselves. In the end, going to the arts can be inspiring and influence people to experience new things and think in different ways,” Bolton said.<sup>47</sup>

When Michael Bolton was asked what key elements make the curriculum successful, he first stated that it needed to be as interdisciplinary as possible. The other overarching key element is team teaching. He believes that the only way that the curriculum can be truly successful is if Michael and the schoolteachers work together on instructional activities in order to reach the goals of both parties.

Though it is noteworthy that the Opera Company of Philadelphia is working to make the arts more accessible, other organizations need to follow their

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<sup>45</sup> Michael Bolton. Opera Company of Philadelphia. Interviewed by author, 25 October 2011.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

lead. Michael was asked what core elements from his program could be adapted by other arts and culture organizations. He suggested that other organizations work on using as many different methods as possible to teach and reach an end result. The example he gave was the *Sounds of Learning* lesson plan that was created for the Opera Company's performance of Hansel and Gretel. For this performance, the participants learned about the opera, the story of Hansel and Gretel and made gingerbread houses. Michael emphasized the importance of finding things that interest other people that can be applied to the cultural experience to both capture and keep the audience's attention. "Though it is hard to measure success, these methods have had positive responses from the participants. Over 90% of the teachers said the *Sounds of Learning Program* has opened the doors of arts for their students," said Michael.<sup>48</sup>

Stephanie Borton, the Associate Director at Art-Reach, learned about this program and approached Michael Bolton about partnering together to use the curriculum to reach people with disabilities. The partnership between the two organizations allows Art-Reach to have access to the *Sounds of Learning* curriculum to use in teaching members about opera and the opportunity to attend a live performance. In order to make sure the curriculum can effectively teach people with different disabilities, Michael has incorporated some new strategies. He provides lesson plans and packets in PDF form so that they can be accessible to people who use screen readers or can easily be translated into Braille or large print. Though Michael has been able to accommodate some of the needs of people with disabilities, accessible accommodations such as Audio Description, sensory tours or Open Captioning have not been incorporated into the programming due to the cost of these services and union regulations.

Lastly, Michael was asked what he thought the arts sector could do to better serve people with disabilities. He first recommended that more arts organizations partner with agencies like Art-Reach who serve people with disabilities. He used to try to directly engage organizations that serve this demographic, but the organizations were not interested because they were unsure

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.



about how the arts would accommodate their clients. Some of the hardest challenges that Michael thinks arts organizations face are time and resources.

*Lynette Pawlak - Associated Services for the Blind*

Next, Lynette Pawlak from Associated Services for the Blind was interviewed to get a perspective from the consumer's point of view. She has been a social worker and a case manager at Associated Services for the Blind since 2008. In her position, Lynette does many things including outreach, running support groups and offering educational services. One of her main responsibilities that over the years has become part of her job description is setting up arts and cultural experiences through Art-Reach. This includes staying up to date with what Art-Reach is offering, reserving tickets to performances, signing up her clients to attend shows and actually going to the shows with her clients. As a result she has been to a lot of different arts and cultural institutions and has had many different experiences.

First Lynette was asked why she thinks people with disabilities are traditionally underserved. She does not think it is the result of one obstacle, but instead explained that the reasons include: financial hardship, fear of not knowing what to expect, not having support to accompany them, concerns with not knowing the proper etiquette or clothing to wear and pride. Though some of the barriers explained above have to be overcome by the clients themselves, there are ways that the arts sectors can help. For example, Lynette thinks that one way the arts and culture sector can improve its service is by providing sensory tours before performances and Audio Description during performances for people who are blind and visually impaired. A patron's experience is also enhanced when he or she has the chance to explore the stage and feel props during a sensory tour before a show. Additionally, Lynette believes that giving a group with disabilities time to get to know a space before the crowds arrive would help ease concerns and anxiety.

Any experience can be improved or hindered by the way you are treated by the staff at a venue. Therefore, Lynette was asked what she thought were key elements to remember when serving people with disabilities. She responded: “ It is important to recognize that everyone is different and it is best to not make assumptions. The staff should treat everyone like a human being and the best way to accomplish this is by properly training and educating the staff.”<sup>49</sup>

Lynette was also asked to share what she thinks the largest challenges are when connecting arts experiences with people who have disabilities. Lynette listed: “getting the word out to this community, limited access, and getting reliable and educated support to help people who are blind to go to a cultural event.”<sup>50</sup>

One cultural event that she attends with her clients is the opera presented by the Opera Company of Philadelphia. Since Associated Services for the Blind is a member of Art-Reach, they were offered an opportunity to participate in the *Sounds of Learning Program* before they went to the performance. Lynette explained that the staff of the Opera Company of Philadelphia and those who taught the *Sounds of Learning Program* were extremely accommodating and made sure her clients had the best experience they could.

Though offering this program to people with disabilities is a step in the right direction, there is still a lot to be done to accommodate the needs of all different audience members. Lynette explained that the largest hardship when participating in the *Sounds of Learning Program* lay in the difficulties presented by language and visual barriers. Her clients joined a class with people who did not have visual impairments, which sometimes can lead to clients feeling isolated. With that said, she appreciated the fact that she was able to take the tools from the lessons back to Associated Services for the Blind which allowed her the chance to convert them into large print and Braille. The program was not perfect for her clients, but she still felt that the educational experience was meaningful and her clients enjoyed the opera. She believes that the lessons gave her clients a better

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<sup>49</sup> Lynette Pawlak, Associated Services for the Blind. Interviewed by author, 30 October 2011.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

understanding of the common terms used when speaking about opera, including the stories and the music.

*Stephanie Borton – Art-Reach*

The last person interviewed for this thesis was Stephanie Borton, who works at an organization whose mission is to make the arts more accessible for people with disabilities. Stephanie Borton is the Associate Director at Art-Reach and has been with the organization for six years. When she first started she was the only person in the programming department. For three years she ran the day to day operations of programming which included: setting up trips, developing new relationships with members and arts partners, improving processing and standards around programs, improving service, and facilitating workshops. Once Art-Reach hired a Program Manager, she was able to redirect her focus on more global elements of Art-Reach and the ability to connect underserved audiences with arts and culture experiences.<sup>51</sup>

Two years ago, Art-Reach restructured after hiring a Program and Development Assistant to help the Program Manager and Development Manager. At this time Stephanie was promoted to her current position. Now she oversees the Program Director and Development Manager, making sure that both departments communicate with one another in developing new programs, getting funding and making certain funds raised are used responsibly.<sup>52</sup>

As stated earlier, Art-Reach not only connects the arts with varied audiences, but is also a resource for the arts sector to learn how to better serve and reach people with disabilities. Stephanie was first asked how people with disabilities can currently experience the arts. She explained that there are many ways that people with different disabilities are able to experience the arts, though many times the services are not available.

“With that said, ideally people should be able to call before they visit a venue and express their different needs and capabilities to

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<sup>51</sup> Stephanie Borton. Art-Reach. Interviewed by author, 17 November 2011.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

the staff members. For example, American Sign Language Interpretation, Open Captioning and Assisted Listening Devices can be offered to people who are deaf or hard of hearing. Wheelchair seating can be offered for people with a physical disability. Large print programs, Braille programs and Audio Description can be available for people who are blind or visually impaired. All of these services enable all audiences to fully participate and appreciate the performance regardless of their ability.”<sup>53</sup>

Stephanie explained that to help the Greater Philadelphia region become more accessible, Art-Reach has partnered with VSA Arts of Pennsylvania (the state-designated organization for arts and disability services and support) to offer free and accessible community events as part of the Independence Starts Here (ISH) initiative. During these events, people with and without disabilities have the chance to experience the tools and technologies that make the arts accessible first-hand. These features heighten enjoyment and understanding by people with sensory disabilities as well as family, friends and community members without disabilities. They are all able to relate to each other in comprehensive and inclusive ways regarding the cultural experience.

Art-Reach always tries to capture feedback about such experiences. “In 2008, one mother brought her daughter, who is blind, to an Independence Starts Here event, where they experienced a sensory tour and Audio Description together for the first time. Since then they have attended numerous Independence Starts Here events offered by Art-Reach, explaining that it is the only time the entire family can share a cultural experience together, she said.”<sup>54</sup> Another repeat audience member at ISH events shared the following about her experience:

My Husband and I are both hearing impaired. I had never seen the play and my husband and I had never been to your theatre before. In fact we have only been attending theatre performances in the past year because Art-Reach has obtained captioning for us. We love your theatre, the performance was just excellent, and I felt so good to be part of the “theatre experience” that hearing people enjoy.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

Overall, this program has garnered results that demonstrate a clear desire for greater access to the arts by people with disabilities.

Stephanie Borton then addressed what she views as the largest challenges for reaching and exposing people with disabilities to the arts. She began by explaining that for many years, accessibility was not a concern in public venues. The ADA was created in 1990, therefore advocacy leaders of the equal rights movement for people with disabilities still find themselves engaged in making public venues, including arts and culture venues, accessible to people with disabilities. Stephanie noted:

“Though we have come a long way, there is still much work to be done. It is still too common for those who remember when they were not welcomed or included in arts experiences, to continue to not feel welcome. In order to address this problem there has been a large effort in recent years to make this population feel welcome again, to build their trust, and to educate those people who may not be aware of new technologies that exist for them, their families and friends to help them all enjoy the arts together.”<sup>55</sup>

“With that said, the ADA law leaves a lot open for interpretation, which means that many times an easy and inexpensive fix to a physical space is overlooked. This happens often in Philadelphia because many of the spaces are historic sites, which are traditionally not accessible and extremely expensive to renovate. In addition, venues do not completely understand that making a space accessible and making a performance accessible are two very different conversations, though, they are both important and needed for all individuals to be able to fully participate in cultural activities.”<sup>56</sup> Stephanie explained that more commonly leaders in the arts lean towards compliancy with physical space and do not focus on programming due to education and cost. She believes adapting existing lesson plans, tours, workshops or performances is needed to accommodate different disabilities. Often directors and teachers do not have the knowledge or funding to carry out the plan to make services completely accessible.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

“It can cost upwards of \$2,000 to offer American Sign Language interpretation, \$1,500 for Open Captioning, \$300 for Audio Description and \$500 for marketing per show. On the consumer side, the cost of cultural activities is also a common barrier for people who have disabilities. Therefore, the unfortunate truth is a grim cycle where people with disabilities commonly cannot afford to go out to a cultural experience and without an audience to generate income to recoup the cost of accessible services, venues are unable to offer them.”<sup>57</sup>

Next, Stephanie addressed ways arts and culture organizations can do a better job of reaching and serving people with disabilities. She explained that the most important component is a clear commitment by the whole organization to provide accessible programming and make venues accessible. Resources available to begin to learn about ways to do this include: VSA, a national organization that serves people with disabilities in the arts and those who serve them; and LEAD (Leadership Exchange in Arts and Disabilities), a conference where all facets of accessibility are covered.

In Philadelphia, Art-Reach partners with VSA of Pennsylvania to head the Independence Starts Here initiative. This initiative provides marketing and technological support to venues that are able to offer accessible accommodations and disseminate information to the paying public.

Stephanie thinks that the easiest way to approach accessibility is by asking a lot of questions, listening and acting on promises. “Fear holds organizations back from approaching specific groups of people and asking them what they need; it also holds them back from outwardly asking for help to become ADA compliant. Furthermore, when asked, many disability communities are willing to guide and help those trying to help that population.”<sup>58</sup>

The next question Stephanie was asked was what she thought the key elements are to remember when serving people with disabilities. She believes that the most important thing to remember is that we are all people and that a disability does not change that. She explains that when speaking with someone with a disability, first person language such as “person with a disability” is best.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

In addition, always address the person with a disability directly as opposed to speaking to them through their companion. For example, ask how you can best serve them and be honest if you need guidance.

Stephanie then shared her thoughts on the *Sounds of Learning Program*. She explained that it combines hands on learning, listening and writing activities to essentially cover all styles of learning and can be adapted to suit different abilities. The layout is clear and easy for teachers to teach. Stephanie listed the components of the program which include:

- The libretto is read and acted out.
- The music is listened to in small sections and then discussed.
- Etiquette and what to wear is covered. During this section, the teacher explains that casual dress is appropriate, which is a great way to make everyone feel comfortable.
- Fun facts about the venue are covered.
- Challenges are given to find certain items in the venue and during the performance to keep the audience engaged from the second they enter the space.
- Interviews with actors, directors and others involved in the production including their history and how they came to be a part of the show, are provided.
- Terminology used in the performance is explained.
- Hands-on art making or acting activities are included in an effort to make all of the learning fun.<sup>59</sup>

Stephanie believes that if elements from this program were adopted by other venues including museums, audience engagement among people with disabilities and people without disabilities would increase. All individuals learn differently, thus educational experiences provide audiences the opportunity to learn through their greatest strengths, i.e. by visual, listening or hands-on activities.

Supplementing an arts experience with education helps the person viewing art feel more at ease and knowledgeable about what he or she is participating in.

Stephanie stated, “An educated audience is a more engaged audience because they understand and appreciate the discipline and elements needed to produce art forms. Once you participate in an art form, you have a deeper-rooted appreciation for the art form itself. This is proven in ‘Research into Action’ which states that

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

those who practice arts activities are more likely to purchase tickets again and seek out additional opportunities.”<sup>60</sup>

The interview ended by asking Stephanie to share a memorable response from a member of Art-Reach who had an educational arts experience. Stephanie recalled a unique experience she had.

In one case a group of young girls attended the Pennsylvania Ballet and were restless in their seats. When asked why they were not able to pay attention, they said it was boring. I thought I was being clever, and told the girls that they should look at the dancers’ feet because if they missed steps, and were off beat of the music they would get in trouble. The girls responded by asking what a beat was. An impromptu, very rough, education session occurred when I realized that they had no idea what elements make up music or the discipline needed to dance. We clapped out rhythms, learning about beats, and did some ballet positions all in the course of intermission. In the second act, not a peep or rustle was heard. The girls were on the edge of their seats, one even sketched the dancer because she said, “It was so beautiful I did not want to forget what it looked like.” Coming out of the theatre every girl was twirling and pretending to be a ballerina, and at least three stated they wanted to be dancers when they grew up.

She truly believes that art venues will see an increase in usage if they offer more educational arts experiences. To enhance her point she told a story of a different Art-Reach member.

A group of 18-25 year olds attended the *Sounds of Learning Program*. They lived in a residential home for people who have a mental illness. They owned few possessions and were not allowed to keep much in their rooms. They enjoyed the program. They made gingerbread houses while listening to the arias in Hansel and Gretel. They acted like kids, and were happy. When they left, we told them that the books were theirs to keep. They could not believe that they were able to take them home. When they attended the performance, they asked to meet the man who wrote their books. When the gentleman came over, he was treated like a rock star. Originally the Opera Company of Philadelphia was fearful that this group would not sit still because of their disabilities. After the performance they proclaimed this group to be the best audience they ever had. The group returned to see three more operas.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.



## INTERVIEW ANALYSIS

After interviewing the three individuals the answers were reviewed and indicated that the interviewees shared many of the same points of view. The three interviewees had strong opinions on how the arts affect audiences and accessibility, the barriers people with disabilities face when experiencing the arts, and challenges arts organizations face when serving different communities. All three individuals believe that the arts are inspiring and can influence people to discover new passions. With that said, they also noted that there is still a long way to go in order to make the arts accessible to anyone and everyone. During the interviews the most substantial missing piece mentioned was a true partnership between the arts organizations and the audience members. The cause of this is a lack of education on both sides. Arts organizations need to be educated on what is available to make venues and performances more accessible, and consumers need to learn that they are welcome to experience any type of art.

Other barriers that both groups share include limited resources, staff, time and ability to promote the arts to all the people they serve or want to serve. Both groups also must be open to change for improvements to occur. These too, can begin to be addressed through the education of presenting organizations and consumers. For arts organizations, there are customer service trainings and workshops that teach what accommodations are available and how to incorporate them into performances. For example, in the summer of 2011, Art-Reach offered a workshop called “Wrap Your Mind Around This,” which invited working professionals in the theatre community to learn about different disabilities and how they can serve them through technology and education.

Education sessions are also needed for consumers. Though curriculum does exist to teach the arts, including the *Sounds of Learning* curriculum, a topic that was not addressed in the interviews was ways to enhance an already existing curriculum to better teach and serve people with disabilities.

## Curriculum Analysis and Suggestions

To learn more about ways to enhance an existing curriculum, resources were reviewed that were introduced at Art-Reach's "Wrap Your Head Around This" program. On the Pennsylvania Department of Education website, there is a resource that offers information on different disabilities, how the disabilities may affect the ways students learn, how you can change the classroom setting and curriculum to better teach people with different disabilities, and suggestions on how to test these students.<sup>61</sup> All of these ideas and suggestions are catered to a number of artistic disciplines including: visual arts, dancing, theatre and music. In order to gather a well-rounded view of how to best teach people with different disabilities, information was collected on how to teach these different art forms to people with Autism, cognitive disabilities, visual disabilities and hearing impairments. The information was then categorized into three sections; teaching practices that should be adopted when teaching everyone, suggestions for teaching practices that can be used when teaching people with different disabilities and suggestions that are specific to a person with a certain disability.

There are some strategies that are important when teaching a classroom filled with any type of student, no matter the age, background or ability. These include: the use of clear simple directions, the emphasis on students interests and strengths, providing a purpose for learning, establishing goals and rules and being positive to encourage the students. The teacher's attitude and body language can have a large impact on the feelings of the students and the impact the lessons have.

Next, this thesis notes suggestions from the website that were repeated on the pages for teaching people with disabilities, no matter their disability or art form. The information was then further broken down to better understand teaching suggestions that relate to the physical space verses the lesson plans.

One of the most important ways to best teach people with disabilities is to make the learning experience as consistent and predictable as possible. The first

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<sup>61</sup> The website being referred to is [www.keyarts.org](http://www.keyarts.org).

suggestion the website had was to schedule time for students to become oriented with the space before class begins. Many people have anxiety when they are unsure about what to expect. Time with the teacher and the space before class can be a good way to address this. In addition, the teacher should schedule his or her planning time to include lesson plans that are ready for students before the first day of class. This will enable the teacher or aides time to convert materials into Braille or large print if a student is visually impaired. Preparing lessons in this way may provide comfort to the student and teacher.

It is important for the teacher to both recognize and understand that not all students learn the same. A tip for addressing this is to clearly define the beginning and end of an activity at the start of class, and to include the goals of the lesson broken down into smaller more concise sections. Furthermore, it is helpful to explain what the students will want to look for, observe, hear or see before an art experience begins. Repetition is also helpful during the class as well as making the presentation as multi-sensory as possible. For example, when teaching dance, it is helpful to not only display and verbally explain steps, but also to have pictures that demonstrate each motion of the dance step to help the students follow along.

“The structure and layout of the classroom is a key element in successfully teaching all students, and in particular, people with disabilities. In an effort to build a routine, the teacher should allow the student to enter the classroom late and leave early to avoid the noise and inconsistency of setting up and breaking down the classroom. The student should also be seated near good role models to limit distractions. Additionally, it is imperative that the teacher models patience and understanding and insists that the classroom atmosphere is one of acceptance.”<sup>62</sup>

“There are some general tips for teachers to understand when teaching people with disabilities. The teacher should avoid touching the student suddenly and without warning. They should also give the student time to absorb directions and leave time for questions. If the teacher thinks that the student will need breaks

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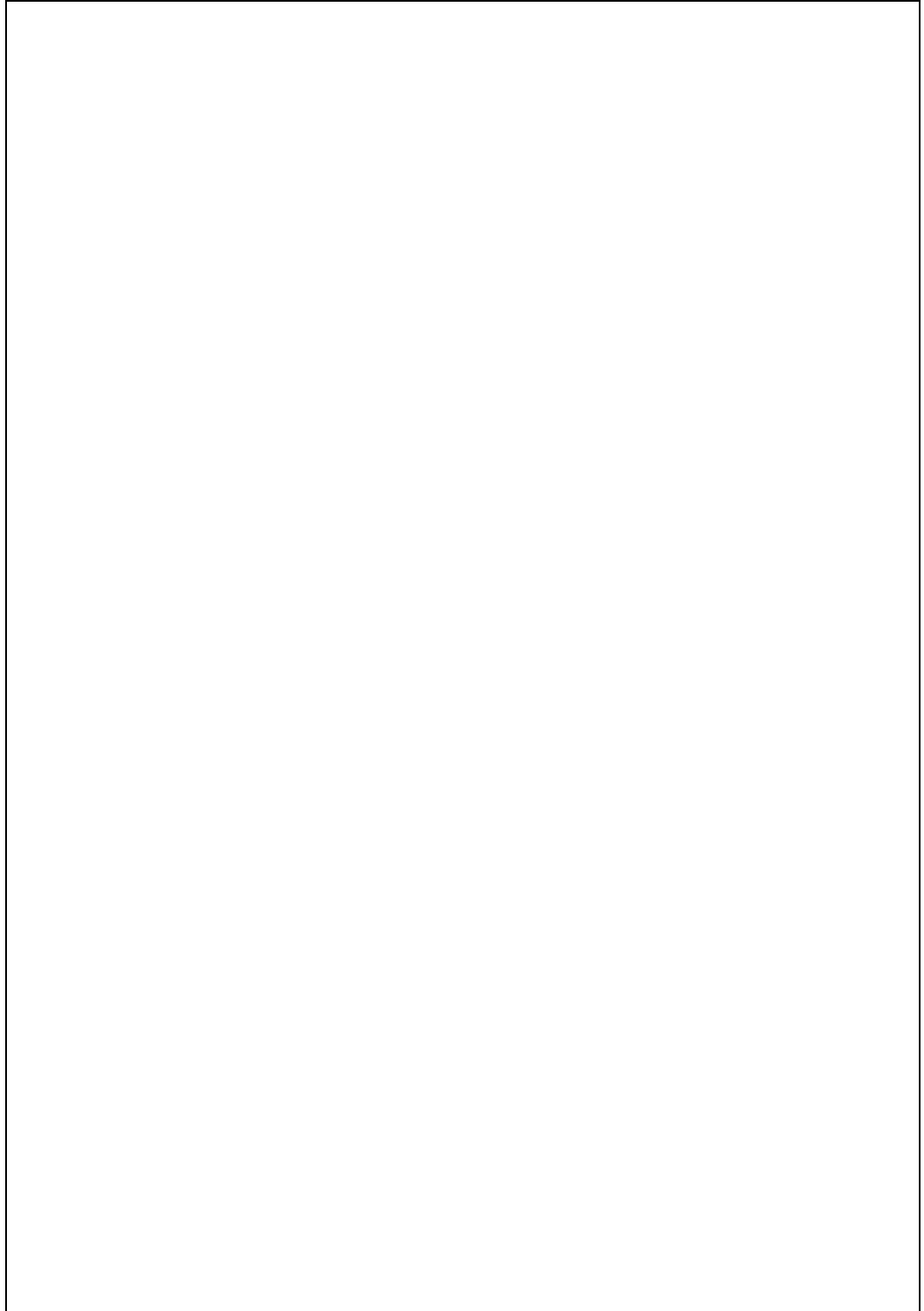
<sup>62</sup> *Key Arts*. <http://keyarts.wikispaces.com> (accessed 8 January, 2012).

throughout the class, the teacher should set up a seat in the classroom that is a designated space for the student to go to if they are feeling overwhelmed. With all this said, the teachers need to remember and be encouraged to think outside the box and be creative in the ways they teach and incorporate all of the students in their classroom.”<sup>63</sup> For example, a theatre teacher could cast a part with two students, in which they act side by side. The peer student could help the person with a disability with their entrance and exit queues.

Lastly, some accessible accommodations are for people with specific disabilities. The table below takes information and suggestions from <http://keyarts.wikispaces.com> about how to best utilize accessible accommodations and teaching practices when teaching people with specific disabilities.

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.



## Final Suggestions

After examining the broad history of accessibility through general research, interviews of Philadelphia organizations and a case study of the *Sounds of Learning Program*, this research found that the arts and culture sector has made large improvements to serve all audience members no matter their ability. With that said, there are still advancements to be made.

The *Sounds of Learning* curriculum has effective elements to teach any audience member, though, it is clear that the targeted audience is Philadelphia school classrooms who have a whole semester to teach the lessons. In order to allow the curriculum to be used by a wider audience, it should be broken down into shorter, more concise, sections. Similarly, the Opera Company gives suggestions for exercises to use when teaching the material. It would also be beneficial to suggest multi-disciplinary exercises to use when teaching the material to people other than school aged students.

One way that the Opera Company of Philadelphia can improve the viewing experience for audience members is to offer more accessible accommodations to people who are blind or visually impaired. Ways to do this include: offering a sensory tour before the performance; opening the venue before the show to allow audience members to get to know the space; offering Audio Description during the show; and, translating programs into Braille and large print.

On a larger scale, there are improvements the Philadelphia arts and culture sector can make to be more accessible, connect the arts with more audiences and better serve people with disabilities. Ways to accomplish this are to create more partnerships between arts organizations, much like the working partnership between Paper Mill Playhouse and Pushcart Players. This requires arts organizations to be more flexible and open-minded with their seasons, performances and performance space.

Additionally, service can be improved by inviting experts to come into Philadelphia and offer education experiences to arts organizations and teach them how they can make venues accessible, performances accessible and implement best practices for staff. If there are no education experiences available, organizations can also ask for help from people in the community who may have a disability or work to improve accessible accommodations in the Philadelphia region. With that said, for any education to stick, there needs to be a clear standard of service and a total buy-in from the whole organization.

As stated throughout this paper, improving accessibility in the arts is not one-sided. Many consumers have concerns about going out to performances. These concerns can be addressed with greater availability of educational opportunities for audience members.

As we have seen since the Americans for Disability Act was created, America has become more and more accessible over the years. In the arts field there are many barriers that prevent an organization from being accessible such as: funds, resources, unions and historic buildings. Yet, the sector needs to learn that “sorry” or “no” is not acceptable. There are too many educational resources for organizations and individuals that can help them be creative with the goal of allowing every community member to have moving and powerful arts experiences. This may mean that the cast goes out into the community to perform or that two theatres partner together, pooling resources and changing shows to be better understood by people with developmental disabilities. They can also offer a sensory tour or change the performance venue to one that is wheelchair accessible. With every barrier there is a chance for an organization to challenge itself to learn how to move beyond the obstacle and advance the state of the arts and cultural sector as a whole. All it takes is flexibility, creativeness and a willingness to change.

## APPENDICES



## APPENDIX A

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

#### Interview Questions for Mike Bolton

1. What is your history and position with the Philadelphia Opera Company?
2. What were the reasons that the Philadelphia Opera Company began the *Sounds of Learning* program?
3. How do the partnerships between the Philadelphia Opera Company and the participants of Sounds of Learning begin? How did your partnership with Art-Reach begin and why?
4. When writing the curriculum, what were the key elements that you felt needed to be included in the class in order to make is successful?
5. How do you think that the core elements and values of the *Sounds of Learning Program* can be adapted to different arts and cultural experiences?
6. What changes has the Philadelphia Opera Company seen in the understanding and appreciation of Opera since implementing this program?
7. Are there changes you made to the curriculum and or teaching of the class when the audience includes people with disabilities? Why or why not and how?
8. How can experiencing the arts be influential in the learning process of its audience?
9. In the arts sector, why do you think people with disabilities have been traditionally underserved?
10. How can the arts sector better assist, as well as reach out to, people with disabilities in experiencing the arts?
11. What are the largest challenges arts and cultural organizations face when trying to serve people with disabilities?

### Interview Questions for Lynette Pawlak

1. What is your history and position at your organization?
2. What does your organization do and whom does it serve?
3. In the arts sector, why do you think people with disabilities have been traditionally underserved?
4. What are the key elements to remember when serving people with disabilities?
5. How do you think individuals working in the arts and culture sector can improve to better serve people with disabilities?
6. What did you and your clients like about Sounds of Learning and what do you feel could have been improved? How can experiencing the arts be influential in the learning process for your clients?
7. What are the largest challenges arts and cultural organizations face when trying to serve people with disabilities?

### Interview Questions for Stephanie Borton

1. What is your history and position with Art-Reach?
2. Currently, how can people with disabilities experience the arts?
3. What are the largest challenges to reaching and exposing people with disabilities to the arts?
4. In the arts sector, why do you think people with disabilities have been traditionally underserved?
5. How can experiencing the arts be influential in the learning process of its audience?
6. How can arts organizations do a better job of reaching out to and serving people with disabilities?
7. What are the key elements to remember when serving people with disabilities?
8. How do you think that the core elements and values of the *Sounds of Learning Program* can be adapted to different arts and cultural experiences?
9. Why do you think an educational experience can enhance an arts and cultural experience for people with disabilities?
10. What are memorable responses you have received from member organizations after having experienced an educational arts experience?
11. Have you seen an increase in usage after a member agency has experienced an educational arts experience?

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